

Testimony before the Appropriations Committee

February 23, 2017

Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) and Department of Public Health (DPH) and Department of Developmental Services (DDS) budget cuts and changes

Governor's Proposed FY 2018-2019 Budget

Good afternoon Senators Osten and Formica, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Laura Noe and I am a registered voter in Branford.

I am here to testify in strong opposition to budget cuts for DMHAS and DPH, and in support of continuing investments in housing supports and services.

Current mental health statistics state that 1 in 5 people experience a mental health condition. Mental health symptoms can be subtle and often people may not realize they need help. For some people, part of experiencing a mental health condition includes difficulty making clear, healthy decisions. Early identification and intervention, as well as supportive care and services, and medication, help people avoid devastating consequences, like homelessness.

That is why I am here today. My brother Ed, until recently, had been homeless, or as he would say, "living outside" for 25 years - half his life. As hindsight is often 20/20, looking back, Ed showed signs and symptoms as early as the second grade, when he was 7 years old. Ed struggled through high school and talked about "hearing things" and feeling like he was being watched. He studied forestry at the University of Maine which was the beginning of his love affair with trees.

Our mom died in 1990 of a brain tumor. Stunned by her death, our family fell apart soon after. Ed became nomadic and hitchhiked across the U.S. Our family had sporadic contact with him. We would receive occasional phone calls from Alaska or Colorado.

Ed returned to the northeast and settled in New Milford, CT in 2006. At that time he was homeless and negotiating life with mental health issues. Ed lived on the streets and slept in the alleyways of New Milford. It was the kindness, generosity and empathy of that community that sustained Ed. Using donated sleeping bags, Ed slept outside enduring freezing temperatures all while dealing with his mental health issues. Ed did not like to accept help and prided himself on his independence, which, I believe was a blessing and a curse.

Our dad was diagnosed with brain lesions in January of 2015 which prompted me to use social media to find Ed. I had not seen him in nine years and had no idea where he was. Soon after our father's funeral, I received a text. "Ed is on the New Milford green in a brown coat."

I drove from Branford to New Milford and found my brother on the green in filthy clothes, confused, somewhat belligerent and standing near a garbage can. That was February 17, 2015 and it was 7 degrees out. I wept as I approached him, shocked by his appearance and his confusion at seeing me. And, I had hard news to deliver, our dad had died.

From that day on, I drove to New Milford every two weeks with a brown bag lunch and a note, You Are Loved. I would drive around, and most times, find him. Our meetings were short as Ed had "work to do taking care of the trees." During one of my visits, I went to the local social services office, and met Peg Molina. She filled me in on more of Ed's story and how the community had been feeding, clothing and helping him, and how Ed would often help people in return. Although there is a homeless shelter in New Milford, Ed would not often abide by their hygiene rules and was forced back outside.

With the help of an intervention team, put together by Peg, Ed changed his life that day by saying 'yes' to help and healing.

With Ed's consent, the team took him to Danbury Hospital to get his leg looked after, which had been injured and after, took him for a psychiatric evaluation. For the first time in his life, Ed was formally diagnosed with schizophrenia and prescribed medications. Ed worked with Lyana Ramirez, the social worker at Danbury Hospital, attending group therapy and other healing activities. While at Danbury Hospital, the doctor determined that Ed could no longer care for himself by himself. Based on the result of the probate hearing, I am now also his co-conservator, aside from being Ed's older sister.

Because Ed needed more care than the hospital could provide, he was moved to Connecticut Valley Hospital (CVH). Attending twice monthly treatment plan meetings, Ed said 'yes' to all the services and programs CVH offered – yes to meditation; yes to yoga; yes to swimming; yes to on campus walks and movie nights; yes to frequent day passes with me, where we would go for long walks into the woods and hike on trails so he could hug trees.

It was during those quiet walks in the woods, that I saw and felt my brother's courage, tenderness, perseverance, resiliency, and hope. Ed set the speed for his own healing.

During his time at CVH, his medication was lowered and his diagnosis adjusted. Ed was healing fast and was "too healthy to stay." DMHAS helped find housing in the community. Less than four months after being admitted to CVH, Ed moved to Transitional Housing (THP) in Danbury.

He is one of 20 residents with 24-hour care and support. His case manager, John is an excellent advocate.

Ed is flourishing!

He bought himself a bicycle and rides up to Tarrywile Park to hike. Ed cooks his own meals; is reading books again and calls me and my son to ask how we are doing. He attends church every Sunday morning and is interested in planting a garden this spring. Ed would like to have an apartment of his own, and possibly a part-time job.

Ed received tremendous support and services from the state, which helped build his confidence and sense of self again.

The Ed Noe success story is one part Ed's courage, and ability to change and heal, synched with these 10 pieces:

- 1- New Milford Community
- 2- Peg Molina, social services New Milford
- 3- Community Care Team (CCT), Danbury, Kevin McVeigh
- 4- Danbury Hospital, Lyana Ramirez, social worker
- 5- Connecticut Valley Hospital, Kelly Nichols-Johnson, social worker
- 6- DMHAS, Mary Daraz
- 7- Housing
- 8- Co-conservator, Charlotte Cilley in Danbury (conservator of Ed's estate)
- 9- Catholic Charities, homeless outreach, Michelle Conderino
- 10- Me

My brother is thriving and flourishing because it takes a village.

Ed is thriving and flourishing because Ed has a home, access to medication that helps him, support, love and security. We can help other "Ed's" by not cutting the current DMHAS budget.

I ask for you to maintain and preserve the funding for DMHAS legal services, regional mental health boards, grants for mental health, young adult services, community based services, and funding for School Based Health Centers (in the Department of Public Health).

I also ask you to continue the investments in housing supports and services (in the DMHAS budget) and housing and homelessness services and the Homeless Youth Program (in the Department of Housing) – as they are funded in the proposed budget.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak and share my lived experience about my brother Ed. Ed is healing because of the services and supports he received. And when Ed turns 50 on April 9th, we will have a lot to celebrate!